

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewees: **Bill Louviere, Jr.**

Interview Date: 01/30/2010

Interviewer: Bruce Kelly

Transcriber: Marsha Smith

Location: St. Theresa's Catholic Church, Sugar Land

9 Pages



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Bruce Kelly on left, Bill Louviere, Jr. on right.

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Transcript

KELLY: Tell me about your parents.

LOUVIERE: Well my father's name is William; my mother's name is Betty. My father was born in south Louisiana in a town called Houma, he graduated from LSU in chemical engineering. My mother was born in Hollister, California. My dad was out there during World War I and that's when they met and got married. They went back to Louisiana because dad was in the sugar business. There are many sugar companies all over the world, Puerto Rico, Mexico, different places. He finally ended up at the town called Crockett, which is on the bay of San Francisco Bay at a huge refinery, the largest in the world, called C&H. [California & Hawaii] He was shift superintendent. Then he got a job at Godchaux Sugar Refinery in south Louisiana. He was doing pretty well there. Mr. Kempner, who owned Imperial wanted to enlarge his refinery and modernize it so he came looking for somebody. They all recommended my dad. So Dad came over here as Vice-President of Modernization, or whatever you want to call it. Mr. Kempner son's, Herb, was the president, a real nice fellow but unfortunately he got lung cancer and died. So Mr. Kemper moved my dad into his position as president of the sugar company. We came down here in 1938 because C&H, who he was working for in California, wanted Imperial to put their sugar in C&H's bags and ship it up to the mid-west. They sent my dad down here to oversee it and make sure of the quality in the product. So we drove down here in 1938. I had just graduated from grammar school.

We stayed in a company house, which was on The Hill. I don't remember which house it was. It was rather large and had furniture in it. We stayed there not too long. For some reason or other I slept out on a couch in the living room. Like any kid my age I had a flashlight. During the night I heard a noise and I was sure it was something on the floor. It was mice running all over the damn living room! The next morning I told my dad. He said, "Oh God, don't tell your momma, don't tell your momma!" "Okay, I won't tell her." Well anyway to make a long story short, they decided that it would be better to live in a motel in Galveston on the seawall down there. So we moved down there, but my momma didn't like the drinking water in Galveston. So my dad had to bring her jugs of water from Sugar Land. Well, the trip back and forth was too much so then they moved into a motel on South Main in Houston. We stayed there for about three months. I can tell you my impression of Sugar Land at that time.

KELLY: Please do.

LOUVIERE: I remember they still had banana plants on both sides of Oyster Creek down there. The roads were shell, oyster shells; Lakeview Drive was oyster shell. Where the parking lot now is for the elementary school there was a clay tennis court. People don't remember this but there was a swimming pool at elementary school. It was enclosed you can imagine the noise, the kids screaming hollering no way for the sound to get out.

There was a man named Benny Varnau who was the plant manager. In order to entertain me while I was there, he decided I should play tennis with his son, who was about four or five years older than I was. Man, I wasn't use to the humidity or the heat here. So when I went home my mother thought I had fallen in Oyster Creek. I could not convince her I had not fallen in the creek.

I remember there was a radio station down here, KPRC I believe it was. They had a big tower in our area and they built this two story, what do you call it, studio I guess. Built like a fort. Well they moved...went into Houston. A man named Mr. Weth who was the engineer at Imperial bought it. He and his wife moved down there to fix it up and built a swimming pool. They made it real nice; beautiful grounds, trees. We went swimming in the pool. Ooh boy.

KELLY: Did you attend St. Theresa's at that first trip that you made here?

LOUVIERE: Yes. At that time St. Theresa's was a wooden church over here on Main Street. It was built up on blocks. It had a little bell tower on the front. The bell came from an old railroad engine. I don't know where they got it from, but I remember they told us that. They had two services, one in Spanish and one in English. They had a priest, named Oblate, I don't remember if that is the right name because I was young. He was rough and used to wear cowboy boots. One day they decided the church needed painting. The priest painted the whole church on the outside. In the balcony up above the church was an old pipe organ. The kind you push with your feet, you know. It pulls out and all that. My wife, Billy, sang in the choir with Stanley Borowski and Celso and Roland Rodriguez. Bob Laperouse played the organ. I remember one time we attended the Spanish Mass. The Spanish people always made sure that we got on the front row because we were Caucasian. I remember that they came late, the Mexicans, they were going up the aisle on their knees, like this. They were all poor and when they passed the plate for contribution they'd make change in the plate, put a dollar take out fifty cents.

We left and went back to California. Then next time I came here it was after the World War II.

KELLY: Where did you go to college?

LOUVIERE: I went to LSU and Southwest Louisiana Institute.

KELLY: After you graduated what did you do?

LOUVIERE: I went to work for an advertising agency in Houston, Southwest Indoor Advertising. Then I went to work for Pillsbury Mills. An advertising agency transferred me to Dallas. I was in charge of five people up there. Pillsbury wanted somebody so they hired me. The first thing they did was send me down to Austin. Well let's back up a little bit. When I worked for the advertising company, we lived in Port Arthur, my wife and I. We had a child there, Cathy. Then we moved to Dallas and had a child there, Christy. Then we moved down to Austin and stayed there a little over a year I guess. Then Pillsbury transferred me back to Beaumont because they knew I had been in that area. So we moved to Beaumont. Imperial needed somebody in that market because the man they had working over there didn't know what was going on. I won't mention his name. So Ken Laird came to see me one day and said he wanted to hire me. So I said well okay. At that time my dad was with the company. So I went to work for Imperial.

KELLY: In what capacity?

LOUVIERE: As a sales rep selling sugar. I had Lake Charles, Louisiana, Beaumont, Port Arthur, Orange, up in East Texas as far as Jasper and over to Huntsville. Then they brought me over here to Sugar Land. My wife and I moved eight times in nine years.

My mother and father were living here. We wanted to build a house. We said, "Well we are gonna move to Sugar Land and that's it. I'm not gonna move again. If I've gotta get a job in Houston, I'm not gonna move anymore. So where are we gonna build?" My dad wanted me to build down on Oyster Creek. My wife didn't like it down there for some reason. She had the idea of building a house up on Lakeview Drive near the city park. My dad said, "No, no, no. You can't build there. It's a park, you know." "Well, if can't do that I'll move Houston." Well, he didn't want us to move to Houston. He wanted his grandkids right here, you know. He had the surveyor, Jess Pirtle, survey that park. It was all staked out (laughs). Daddy said, "I got the perfect lot for you." We didn't particularly like that lot, but I wasn't gonna tell him that, so I lied, after he went to all that trouble.

Well what kind of a house are we going to build? When we lived in Dallas the paper use to come out once a week with a plan for a house. I didn't know it, but my wife saw one she thought that she liked. So she cut it out and kept it. So she dug out that plan for that house and it was perfect for the lot because the lot is kind of narrow. So we got this builder to come and he looked at it. "Oh yeah, that's fine." He'd built a couple of houses here in town, one for Bob Hanna, one for Cliff Nygren. So he built this house We moved in and we've been there ever since. So that's our history more or less.

KELLY: In a minute I want to talk more about St. Theresa's, but before we do, tell us about the Sugar Land PTA Follies. 1963 or 1964?

LOUVIERE: Well believe it or not I've got a picture. Billy was involved with the Parent Teachers Association. For some reason they decided to put on The P.T.A. Follies play at the old auditorium. The town wasn't big in those days. I mean they didn't have that many residences, so we got some of the fellows to agree to get up on the stage and act like a bunch of idiots. My wife got to sing Somewhere Over the Rainbow. Margaret Hill she got these big old brassieres (chuckles) for us fellows to wear. So we put them on and stuffed them. Then we had to wear skirts. We came out on the stage and the music started and we did this dance. Everybody was dying laughing. Oh my God, Al Bartolo, Hugh Rouse, myself, James Parks, Bill Little, I forgot the rest of them

KELLY: You were the showstopper.

LOUVIERE: Well, we were the entertainment (laughs).

KELLY: If I remember correctly, Bob Hanna and Barbara Batton did *My Fair Lady*. Let's move on to St. Theresa's because I know this church has played a big part in your life.

LOUVIERE: I've told this story numerous times to the new RCIA people. They had me come in and talk to them about it. It really is interesting. Back in the, oh gosh, forties, late forties, the town was growing. The church attendance was growing. All the churches at that time were on Main Street. I say all of them...most of them. So they start moving over to Eldridge Road, they called it Church Row now. They built some nice churches! The Baptist had theirs right over here on Wood Street.



Baptist Church on Wood Street, Sugar Land

But there were the poor old Catholics out there. They had that old wooden church. Their attendance was growing because of the Mexicans lived over in what we called Mayfield Park now...they called it The Quarters then. All they had to do was come across go to church. They needed a church bad. This is where it gets interesting. Mr. Kempner of Galveston owned Imperial and all this land around here. Bear in mind now that Mr. Kempner was a Jew. My father was Episcopalian and my mother was a Catholic (chuckles). My mother, being a Catholic, she persuaded my father, an Episcopalian, to convince Mr. Kempner, a Jew, that they needed a new church. Mr. Kempner said, "Well okay, you're right. I'll sell you that lot up there where the church is now for a dollar, just to make it legal. Okay?" So they built what we call now The East-West Church.

Well anyway, when it came time for the Stations of the Cross they knew where we were going to get those statues. There was a German engineer named Mr. Weth, I all ready mentioned him. He was the chief engineer at Imperial. Mr. Weth had been a World War I air ace for the German air force. He flew with the Red Baron and all that. He was a very intelligent man. He had a wife who couldn't speak English. Being a Catholic he wanted to help all he could. He said, "I know a wood carver in Germany that will carve out the Stations of the Cross statuaries. I'll pay for it." I don't know how he did it, but anyway, sure enough, one day here come these beautiful carved wooden statues with the Stations of the Cross.

One of my daughters was the first child that was baptized in the East-West Church. We had some great priests at that time. They were of the Basilian order out of Canada. They still have a place over there on Main Street. They did a good job. We decided we needed a bigger church since the town was growing. So they had built what we call now the North-South Church, which incorporated part of the East-West Church.

In the back of the church, up above there is a big cross up there on the wall. Well people don't know it but right in the middle of the cross a trap door opens up like this, okay. The idea was to put a projector up there, which would project song lyrics all the way across the church up on the altar. They had a big black wall up there, so people could sing along. You know what I mean. Well that lasted about (chuckles) two months. People weren't gonna sing. They finally shut it up. It's still up there. So now it's a storage room. People don't know that, you know.

KELLY: You're involved with the Knights of Columbus as well.

LOUVIERE: Yeah, The Columbus Club they call it. That's the financial part of the Knights of Columbus. I've been involved in a lot of things.

LOUVIERE: St. Theresa's had this, I guess you'd call it, an electric organ, that a family donated years ago. We got this new priest from Galveston. He's a diocesan priest named Father Reynolds. He came from a wealthy family in Houston. Money was no object for him. He decided we needed a new organ. They're expensive but they find this used organ back east in North Carolina, or somewhere. They spent I don't know how much money having it re-done, re-built, brought down here. A whole crew had put it together. I think it's got eighty-two pipes or something like that. So that was the latest thing that we got. Well they just finished building a new school that's state of the art.

KELLY: So like the town of Sugar Land you've seen St. Theresa's grow from a small frame building to this really big church with a school and all.

It's an amazing thing to see in one lifetime, don't you think?

LOUVIERE: It really is. I thought about it this morning. We remember when the garbage people would come get your garbage can out of the garage? The town had one garbage truck, that's all we had. They got it from Victoria. They had the damn big sign on it, Keep Victoria Clean. Yeah!

We had a mailman name of Bill something. My wife loved to sing. She would be singing in the kitchen and he'd sit outside the door and listen to her sing before he put the mail in the box. Bill would read our postcards before he put them in there. One more thing about old Sugar Land (chuckles), our phone system was very antiquated. We had an operator, her name was ...

KELLY: Etna?

LOUVIERE: Yeah, remember her?

KELLY: Etna Shindler.

LOUVIERE: Yeah, she knew everything about Sugar Land because she'd listen in. We were living in Dallas and one night I decided I wanted to call my folks there. I called down and Etna got on the phone. "Oh Mr. Louviere," she said, "I think I heard them say they were going over to the Armstrongs, let me switch you over there." My mother would "Shush, don't talk Etna can hear you." Let's see what the heck else was funny. Phone system, garbage, the mail, that was it.

KELLY: Well, that was a really good interview. I appreciate it. We need to sign some legal paper work here. You're left-handed too like me.

LOUVIERE: You are?

KELLY: Yeah, best people are, aren't they?

LOUVIERE: We're not always right; we're never wrong. By the way, I enjoyed working with your father [Charles Edward Kelly] at Imperial. He was a great guy.

KELLY: Well, thank you. He was a great father too. I miss him.

LOUVIERE: I'll bet! Tell you one thing funny about him. I think you might have been with him when he went to Europe one time.

KELLY: My brother was.

LOUVIERE: Okay, they rented an Audi. They came home; he was so impressed with one, he went out and bought one.

KELLY: That's right. He hated that car too. (laughs)

LOUVIERE: Oh he did!

KELLY: He ended up hating it, yeah.

LOUVIERE: HA!